

# Mythical Pictures of the South Slavs<sup>1</sup>

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*The author writes about the so-called “mythical pictures”, a new source for the research of Slavic mythology, which were created in order to express people’s religious notions. The article is centered on four of the most common groups of mythical pictures which, due to their archetypal characteristics have survived to the present: paintings of the human body, those representing the female principle, solar mythical pictures, and the paintings of the male principle.*

The pagan religion and mythology of the Slavs has been systematically researched for over two hundred years. The results of the research turned out especially promising in the second half of the 20th century when the researchers began using modern interdisciplinary methods. Thus not only history, linguistics and ethnology but also many other sciences were given the opportunity to contribute to the enlightenment of the original Slavic religion. However, it has to be said that even today in spite of the strong academic interest and the enormous corpus of the research papers, the study of the pagan religion and mythology of the South Slavs has not given results as positive as those in the corresponding research of the East and West Slavic cultures<sup>2</sup>.

There are four fundamental reasons for the above-mentioned:

1. The sources dating from the Middle Ages, on which the research of the regions settled by the West and East Slavs is based, do mention the South Slavs, however, they almost as a rule never reveal any facts connected with their religion, religious rituals, or deities worshipped by them<sup>3</sup>.

2. Even during the Middle Ages the West and the East Slavs mostly continued living on their original territory, which is the reason why the “Slavic features” can be more easily traced in their material culture. As for the South Slavs, they were a migratory people: they

<sup>1</sup> This article is a brief summary of our book *Митските слики на Јужните Словени*, published in Skopje, Macedonia (by Mislá), in 1994 (574 pages of text and 110 tables with a catalogue of more than one thousand illustrations), and was presented at the lecture held at the history seminar organised by ZRC SAZU (the Scientific Research Centre of the Slovene Academy of Sciences and Arts) and conducted in Ljubljana at SAZU in May 1995.

<sup>2</sup> For basic bibliography see: Š. Kulišić, *Stara Slovenska religija u svijetlu novih istraživanja, posebno balkanoloških*, Sarajevo 1979; H. Łowmiański, *Religia Słowian i jej upadek (w. VI-XII)*, Warszawa 1979; Б. А. Рыбаков, *Язычество древних Славян*, Москва, 1981; Б. А. Рыбаков, *Язычество древней Руси*, Москва, 1987; Н. Чаусидис, *Митските слики на Јужните Словени*, Скопје, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> A part of these rare sources is incorporated into our research (Н. Чаусидис, *Митските...*). Some of the phenomena in the South Slavic pagan religion may be also hidden in some heresy religious systems (Bogumil religion...) which are more often recorded in the Middle Ages sources referring to territories settled by the South Slavs.

left their original territory and, in their migration period, made many contacts with various other peoples and their cultures. During the great migration period they most certainly lost many ethnic elements of their material culture in exchange for gaining new ones, which are today, in the Balkans, still very hard to define.

3. The image of the South Slavic religious culture is even less clear also because of the fact that their material culture - as well as the culture of other Slavic peoples - consists mostly of artefacts made of organic materials. Such a character of the material culture, intertwined into the traditional Slavic village, was preserved until the 20th century. Thus modern researchers (particularly archaeologists) cannot gain a more general insight into the material culture of the South Slavs during the Middle Ages, and consequently they are hampered in their research into the ancient religious and mythological structures of the South Slavs.

4. Because of this "blank" the historic connection of various remnants of the ancient religious beliefs still preserved in the South Slavic folklore is not feasible even though the tradition of the South Slavs is rich in those elements. Maybe this is the reason why until now the attempts at researching the South Slavic pagan religion have been focused mainly on the folklore, especially on the oral tradition and preserved rituals. The historic dimensions of those two elements are not sought in the original territories settled by the South Slavs, i. e. the Balkans, but - by the use of comparative methods - in the tradition of the Western and the Eastern Slavs.

Because of this the research of the South Slavic religion and mythology is non-autonomous and completely dependent on the results of the research made on territories settled by other Slavic peoples. A particular feature, which - even though it may have existed in the South Slavic tradition - cannot be traced or recorded by use of such methods unless it was already present in some of the regions settled by other Slavic peoples. But what if the very feature has not yet been discovered by the research made in other territories? And what about the specific features of the South Slavic religion and mythology that were not necessarily present in the religious or mythological systems of other Slavic peoples? Does this mean they are never to be discovered or understood just because no analogy can be drawn between the religious and mythological systems of the South Slavs and the other Slavic peoples?

In such a hopeless situation, there arises the urgent need for using a relatively new and autonomous research method. By using such a method the research results would no longer be based on comparative studies; the latter would only be used as a means by which the results would be verified.

The methodology of our research is based on the material culture of the South Slavs from their arrival in the Balkans to the 20th century. It comprises the artefacts discovered by archeological research, the elements of the architectural and art objects (often bearing some formal Christian qualities) dating from the Middle Ages, and finally, the artefacts belonging to the South Slavic folklore. It should be pointed out that most of these material artefacts are seen as being part of the mythical and religious structures mostly because of their form, i.e. their visual image. Since the method is based on the material culture, or more precisely on the visual medium, it is necessary that it includes a special mechanism by which the researchers can discover and interpret the character and meaning of a particular picture.

The central notions of this methodology are "mythical picture", "mythical belief" and "mythical or myth-creating consciousness". The mythical picture is a product of spe-

cific principles applied to the operation of the consciousness of Man, as a member of any of the archaic (particularly non-civilised) cultures<sup>4</sup>. Our methodological approach, and the image of mythical consciousness in general, also comprise the notions of analytical psychology (the subconsciousness, and conditionally also the collective unconsciousness), and hence they serve as important components in understanding the archaic cultures<sup>5</sup>.

### What can be described as a mythical picture?

A mythical picture is the basic - and often the only - form of earlier man's plastic expression, and it is the product of specific features of his consciousness. The creation of mythical pictures was inspired by his/her existential needs. Such pictures are not the realisation of a pre-formed idea, but instead they are ideations which take shape in the process of their material creation, in which the subconsciousness plays an important role. From the point of view of the person executing the picture, it is created "all by itself". The mythical picture, being an iconographic and symbolical entity, is not the product of a single creator, but rather the result of the creative process of several generations. It is characterised by gradual transformation, i.e. evolution taking place over many generations, centuries, even several epochs. Taking into consideration all these elements and the role that archaic culture had in forming the personality of the individual, one can say that the mythical picture is a result of the "collective mind", the "collective consciousness" of a given culture. The fundamental motive for its creation is not by nature artistic or aesthetic, but rather magical and religious.

In a real archaic culture the mythical picture does not *represent* somebody or something, it *is de facto* what (according to our interpretation) it represents. From this point of view the creation of a mythical picture can be understood as the intention of the archaic person to make real, i.e. to materialise what the picture symbolically represents. In the prehistoric civilisations the mythical picture performed the function which was at a later time assigned to letters: it articulated the images and ideas, their cultivation, and embedding in the consciousness of the individuals and their environment.

Mythical pictures are transformed in accordance with their function in a given culture and with the changes of the mythical images in relation to what the given mythical picture presents<sup>6</sup>. The transformation is most frequently a gradual, almost invisible process: every culture, i.e. generation cherishes particular mental images of a particular phenomenon (e. g. the form of the universe, the functioning of a particular natural or cultural process, the character of a particular deity...), which exists in the consciousness, i.e. the subconsciousness of each and every member of a given generation. When making a mythical picture (wood carving, embroidery, metal molding) the creator consciously and subconsciously strives to achieve the goal of finding a particular mental picture, to recognise

<sup>4</sup> This comprises also the perception of the world in general, organisation of relevant impressions and creation.

<sup>5</sup> The notions "mythical consciousness" and "mythical belief" comprise all the meanings assigned to them by German philosopher E. Kasirer (E. Kasirer, *Filozofija simboličkih oblika - drugi deo: Mitsko mišljenje*, Novi Sad 1995, especially 36, 37, 47-52, 58-61, 65, 76, 77 (on particular characteristics of the mythical consciousness). On psychological notions compare: C. G. Jung, *Dinamika nesvesnog*, Beograd 1978. For a more detailed insight into our understanding of the term "mythical picture" see: Н. Чаусидис, *Митските...*, 51-67

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed insight see: Н. Чаусидис, *Митските...*, 58-61; N. Čausidis, *The Magic and Aesthetic Functions of Mythical Images in the South Slav Traditional Culture*. In: *The Magical and Aesthetic in the Folklore or Balkan Slavs*, Belgrade 1994, 5-20.

it in the picture he inherited as a prototype, and to transfer it into the new picture he is creating, based on this prototype. Thus the visual form and the meaning of mythical pictures are changed.

It is important to emphasise that the fundamental medium in which mythical pictures were formed, consisted of the non permanent (and at the same time most frequently used) techniques that make use of mostly organic materials (drawings, colouring, embroidery, carving and modelling of skin, textile, wood, wax, dough, nonbaked clay...). The discovery of this fact has been made on the basis of extremely few ancient objects still preserved, and numerous replicas of the original objects made in more durable materials (baked clay, stone, metals).

Mythical pictures should be treated as one of the forms in which mythical belief is captured. They should be seen in connection with other mythical manifestations (the oral myth and myths intertwined into rituals) to whose meaning contribute, and vice versa. Thus, although in concrete cases the pictures can be assigned the primary role in relation to other media, in principle the primary role is actually assigned only to nonmaterialised beliefs, i.e. to mental pictures.

Mythical pictures are still produced long after their original or subsequent meaning has been forgotten; nevertheless, the images and beliefs in its magical powers or its sacral character are preserved. If those no longer exist, the picture enters the process of demythification: it assumes the role of a decorative element, i.e. it becomes an ornament devoid of its mythological and symbolical meanings.

If we set out from the standpoint that the meaning of the symbols (the fundamental "building elements" of a mythical picture) is based on the qualities and functions of the real elements which served as the reference for a symbolical meaning, there is a possibility that the meaning of a particular mythical picture belonging to an ancient or far away culture can be grasped even in the absence of the appropriate context, i.e. the key to the communication with the particular mythical picture and even the culture to which it belongs<sup>7</sup>. Precisely this viewpoint gave us the right to begin the exploration of the pagan religion and mythology of the Slavs (in this particular case especially the South Slavs) setting out from their visual images bearing a certain mythological and religious character.

Our research has been divided into four global complexes which are deeply connected with research into the character and the genesis of the mythical picture. This structure is based on the principal relationship that determines all phenomena of a mythical and religious character. What we are dealing with is the relationship between Man and cosmos, the intention of the archaic cultures to reveal their reciprocal identity (on the level of form, organisation or function), and the will to understand and interpret one element of the pair by use of the other.

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<sup>7</sup> When speaking of archaic cultures, the categories "actual features" or "actual functions" do not refer as much to objective reality as they refer to the specific way in which a concrete detail, i.e. a component of this reality is interpreted in a given culture.

I. PICTURES OF THE HUMAN FIGURE



T. I: 1. anthropomorfisation of cosmos 2. relief, Laussel (Palaeolithic) 3. idol, Zbruč 4. idol, Olsztyn 5. lucky charm, Kirov 6. fresco, Skopje 7. graffito, Provadijska Reka 8. embroidery, Russia 9. gravestone, Dalmatia 10. graffito, Austria (Iron Age) 11. metal tablet, Tesalia 12. fibula, Vojvodina 13. gravestone, Herzegovina 14. gravestone, Dalmatia.

The human figure in mythical pictures is there to evoke the symbolical meaning which it reflects and which is based on the actual biological and cultural functions of Man as well as the functions projected onto him/her by a particular culture. A specific meaning can be traced in every element of the human figure, its particular pose, and other symbols to which it is related in the picture.

In the Slavic culture a picture of a woman with her hand placed around the area of her breast or stomach can be found, even though there are only traces of it to be seen (on tombstones and cult objects). Originally these two poses were to point to the function of the two organs (feeding and giving birth), and thereby to allude to the corresponding functions of nature. Thus these figures revealed the character or the domain of the mythical beings they represented. These notions lead us to the oldest, prehistoric epochs in which the processes of transformation (especially stylisation) of mythical images can be observed. It is of particular importance that throughout the various epochs the process of the identification of a human figure (especially a female one) - its parts and their functions with the corresponding functions and elements of the universe - can be best understood (see: T. I: 1)<sup>8</sup>:

- the Earth as the lower zone of the macrocosm and its power of giving birth, is identified with the analogous female organs and their functions, also set in lower half of her body

- the identity between the sky and celestial waters as the upper zone of the macrocosm and their function to feed what the Earth will give birth to, and the female breast and the milk of a woman (also set in the upper half of a female body and intended to feed what has been born).

The purpose of leaving the framework of the Slavic culture is to penetrate, from the standpoint of the primordial, the meaning of the several of the subsequent enigmatic mythical pictures present in the Slavic culture.

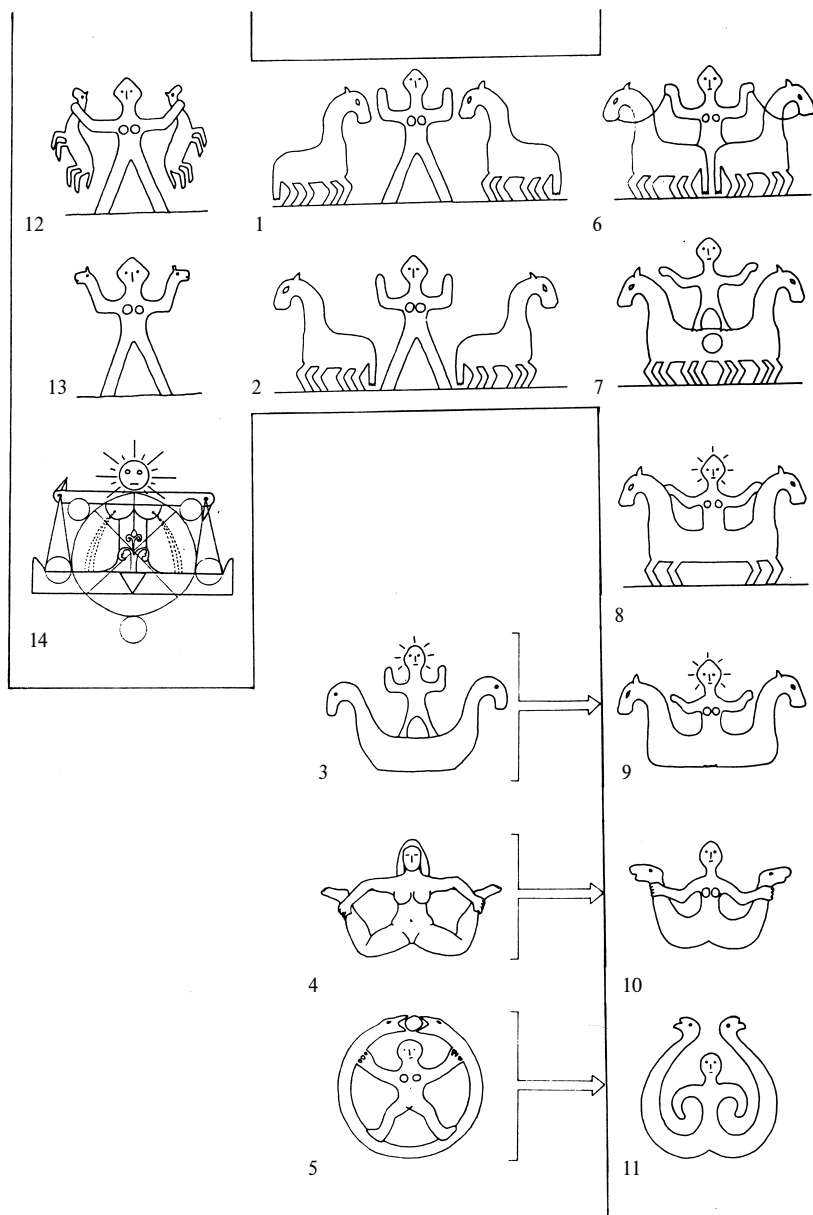
The human figure (originally a female one) holding a riton (one of the early types of pots) in her hand represents the product of the transformation of the oldest pictures of wet nurses in which the riton is seen as a symbolical substitute for the female breast and bears the meaning of the source of food, plenty and well-being in general. In the Middle Ages such images, which are almost completely identical to the oldest prehistoric ones (e. g. the relief from Laussel), could be found in a Slavic cult statuette - the idol of Zbruč. In the new context of war and heroism the above-mentioned meaning could also be traced in male figures set in the same pose (the god Svantovit in Arkona; numerous cult images from Central and Eastern Europe, and seemingly, also a late Christian example found in the vicinity of Skopje - (T. I: 2-6)<sup>9</sup>.

Beside its real biological functions, the human figure represents figures with a cosmic character in order to point out the mysterious forces of creation that initiate and control the cyclical processes in nature. In mythical pictures this is manifested by use of centrally located human figures with sun disks placed in their hands or around them. The disks symbolise various phases of the solar cycle or, at the more abstract level, the seasonal changes or procreative cycle. In this context the hands of the human figure are given the

<sup>8</sup> It should be pointed out that the illustrations have been furnished only with basic information. For more detailed data, including bibliography see: Н. Чаусидис, Митските..., 487-526.

<sup>9</sup> For more details see: Н. Чаусидис, Митските..., 94-100; Н. Чаусидис, Ктиторскиот портрет на крал Марко со ритон во раката и неговите можни паганосовенски предлошки, Научен собир по повод 600-годишнината од смртта на кралот Марко, Скопје-Прилеп.

meaning of forces which initiate those cycles, while the human figure itself (that is the image of a deity it represents) remains a subject who controls these forces and takes care of the cyclical nature of the processes. Such pictures were found on the graffiti from the Middle Ages, on jewellery, and on tombstones from the late Middle Ages; they were also part of the folk ornaments of South Slavic or general Slavic character (T. I: 7-14).



T. II: variants and transformations of symmetrical zoo-antropomorphic mythical pictures.

In the South Slavic as well as many others cultures, symmetrical compositions consisting of one central anthropomorphic figure accompanied by two zoomorphic figures are particularly frequent. Our symbolic analysis has led us to the following global meaning of these compositions. Two animals (whether they be horses, stags or birds) symbolise the dualistic forces, i.e. tendencies present in the universe: the positive and the negative, progressive and regressive forces, the one that initiates growth and giving birth, and the other one responsible for fading away, dying. Between the two animals there is a human figure holding them in its arms or holding their bridle. This figure represents a calming factor, the one to "hold them in its arms", restrain them, to control what they symbolise: the dualistic (more precisely bipolar) tendencies of the universe (T. II)<sup>10</sup>.

These are very important mythical pictures, which clearly interrelated with man's ancient, subconscious and archetypical needs existing as permanent entities through time, adopting various different forms. We have tried to show their principal variations and the line of their transformations on T. II. We believe the primary pictures to be the ones on which there are three figures set apart one from another (1, 2). In the next phase there is already a relationship formed among them, i.e. the human figure starts taming the animals: holding them in its hands (12), bridling them (6) or riding them (7). The latter example reflects yet another phenomenon: two animals are united into a unique being. This fact could represent the notion of a unique character, i.e. the causal relation of bipolar cosmic tendencies. In the next phase the process of fusion follows - three figures are united into a unique composite zoo-anthropomorphic figure: two animals transform into the central, i.e. the human figure's arms (13) or legs (8, 9, 10). This process too could be interpreted as a product of the changes occurring in the perception of the harmony of the world, which no longer exists because of the forces of chaos (animals) and order (Man). The illusory forces of chaos are in fact merely parts, tendencies of the sole subject which is able to bring harmony to cosmos - represented in the picture in the form of a human figure. In this context, in this figure, the weighing-scales can be perceived as the symbol of balance, harmony and order within the universe (14): the human torso with its head represent the vertical axis of the world and the vertical axis of the scales while the extremities (especially arms) represent the bipolar tendencies of the cosmos, and the two side-pans of the scales at the same time.

Influenced by other mythical pictures, this notion enters new phases of transformation, the product of which reflects some other meanings which are more or less consistent with the ones we were talking about so far. It is a picture of a deity sailing a zoomorphic boat (3, 9): the deity set in the pose of a woman who has just given birth, with her legs ending in the form of a zoomorphic heads (4, 10); the figure shaped in a circle, i.e. a wheel (5, 11) - the wheel is formed either by two zoomorphic beings or the figure's zoomorphic legs (in both cases those symbolise two tendencies of cyclical phenomena). The concrete images which belong to most of the above-mentioned types are found on the embroidered linen, in traditional architecture, parts of the household utensils, jewellery and cult requisites of the South Slavs and also other Slavic peoples.<sup>11</sup>

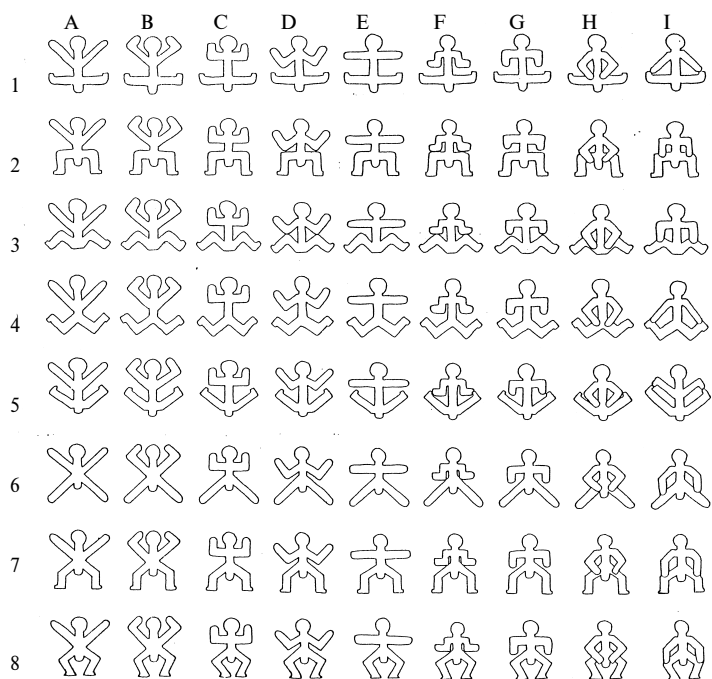
<sup>10</sup> According to our belief the zoomorphic pair - beside its general meaning - have expressed also concrete meanings which have been in relation with the general meaning. Thus migratory birds could be seen as a symbol of nature's fecundity (the arrival of spring of summer), horses and deer - progression and regression of the sun, and snakes - the presence of water.

<sup>11</sup> Н. Чаусидис, Митските..., Т. XXIII - XXVII.

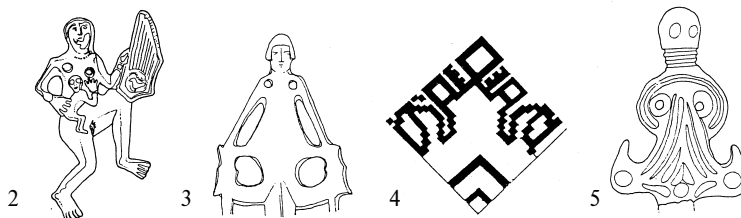


## II. PICTURES REPRESENTING THE FEMALE PRINCIPLE

Members of all archaic cultures, and therefore also the one we are researching, were existentially interested to understand how things in nature came to being - the universe itself, various cosmic elements and cycles, plants, animals and, last but not least, Man. The only way to explain their creation *ex nihilo* was by use of analogy with the fertile women and the act of giving birth in the literal sense of the word. Precisely because of this in all mythical forms, therefore in mythical pictures as well, woman - because of her procreative function - is given the central position - according to the frequency of occurrence as well as the number of symbolical and iconographical types. Since this is a theme which is universal and applicable to all mankind, regardless of period or geographical region, a prevailing number of the South Slavic mythical pictures representing this theme can be traced back to times immemorial, at least in Europe, the Mediterranean and Asia.

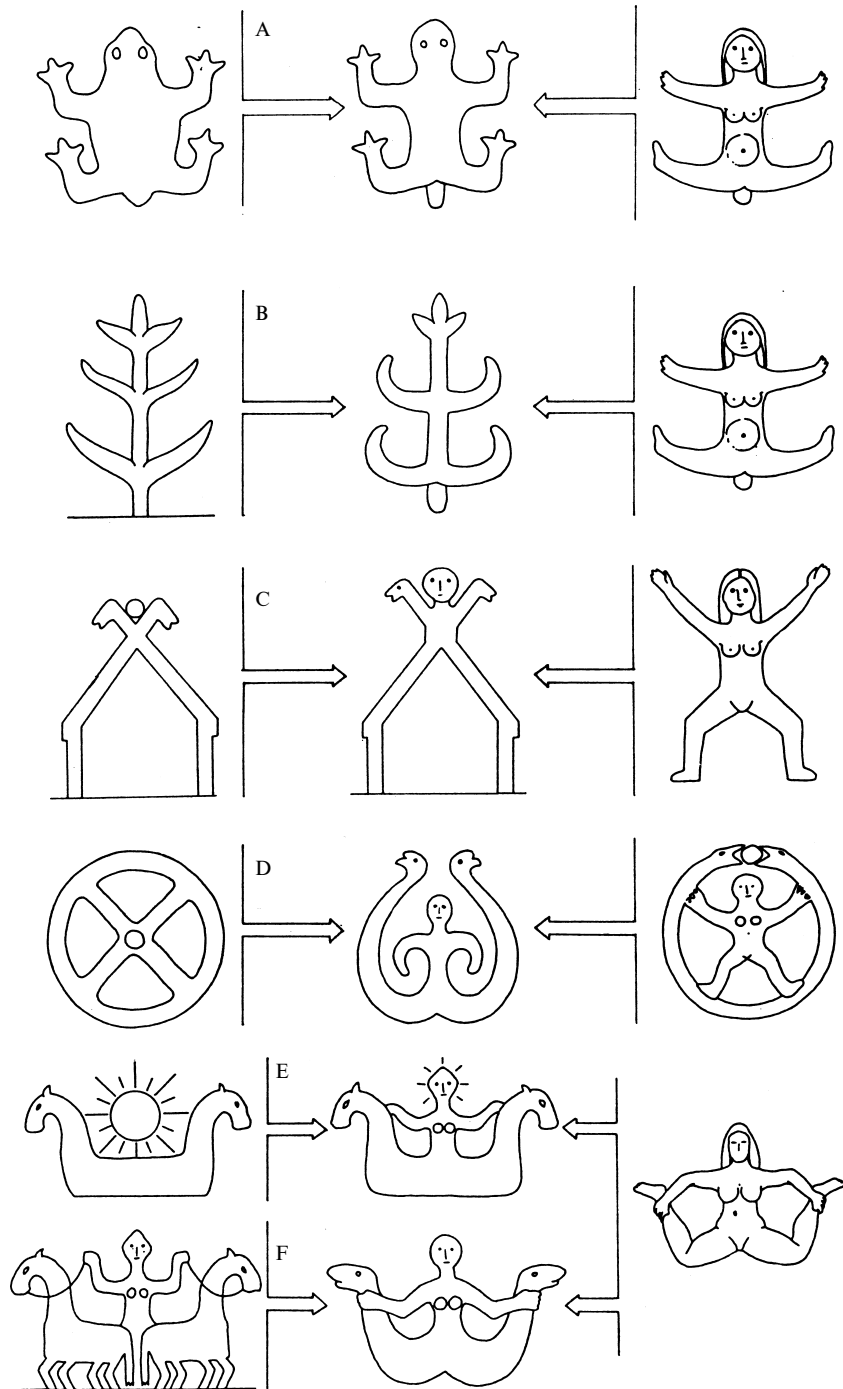


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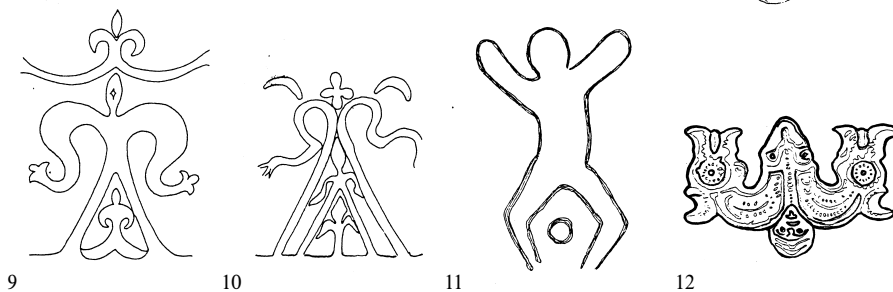
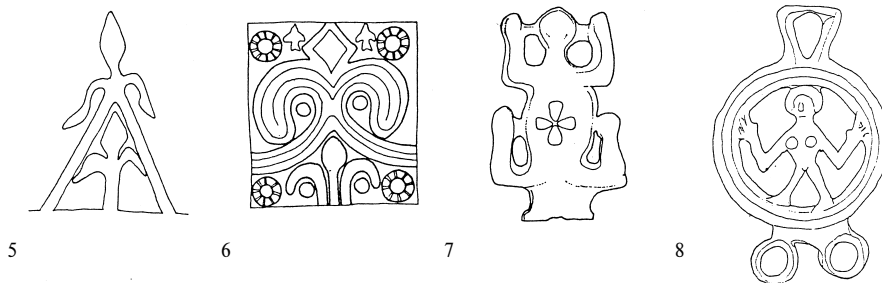
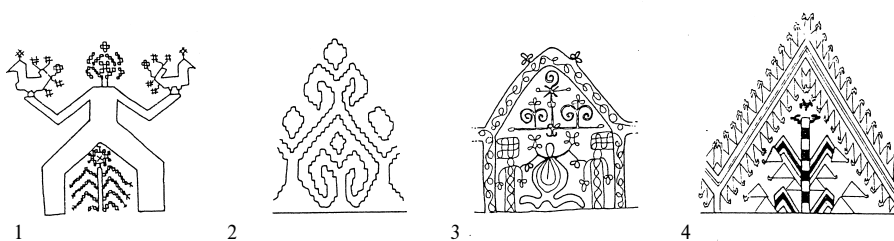


T. III: 1. variants of the posture of the mythical woman who has given birth 2. metal tablet, Tesalia 3. fibula, Čigirin 4. embroidery, Macedonia 5. fibula, Macedonia.

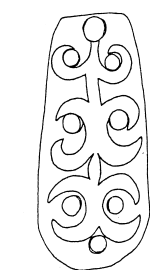
Mythical Pictures of the South Slavs



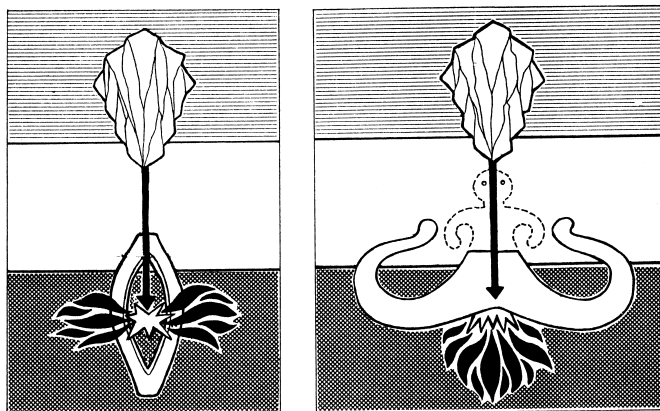
T. IV: symbolical-iconographic shapes of the mythical woman who has given birth.



SKY



13



14

EARTH

T. V: 1. embroidery, Russia 2. embroidery, Croatia 3. embroidery, Russia 4. embroidery, Bulgaria 5. gravestone, Herzegovina 6. decoration, Kosovo 7. votive offering, northern Croatia 8. pendant, Ohrid 9. gravestone, Dalmatia 10. gravestone, Herzegovina 11. gravestone, Montenegro 12. metal tablet, Tesalia 13. decoration, Vojvodina 14. begetting of fire understood as coitus between heaven and earth.

The act of giving birth is rather complex for visual representation, therefore in mythical pictures it is described indirectly and stylised in several ways: as a pregnant woman or as a woman touching her reproductive organs (the stomach area and genitals, which in most cases are shown enlarged or open) or pointing to them, thus alluding to their function and to the act which it about to happen. In concrete cases, giving birth is shown by use of a more or less realistic image of a woman at the very moment of giving birth. The meaning is focused on her posture (there are several variants of the two basic elements: the legs spread apart and the position of her arms), and the stylised baby coming out of her womb<sup>12</sup>. We tried to make a typology of principal variants of the above-mentioned stylised poses that are particularly common on the Slavic ornaments (T. III: 1). The third way of showing the act of giving birth in a picture is by describing the act *post festum*. The baby is placed outside its mother: beside her or in her arms (as is the case of the metal tablet from Tesalia - T. III: 2)<sup>13</sup>.

Like all other mythological representations, the images of giving birth do not end within the limits of reality; reality is only where they begin. The concrete meanings of giving birth are characterised by several elements: the outer appearances and the attributes of the woman who has just given birth and the newborn baby, and the surroundings in which the act has taken place.

Beside the anthropomorphic form, the woman who has just given birth can adopt another three forms: she can be identified with a frog, a plant or a house (T. IV: A, B, C). This is not a mere coincidence, since in real life all three elements are related with fecundity and giving birth, i.e. creation. Frogs are creatures living under earth and in the water, and they are assigned the function of a symbol and the representative of those two functions, incarnated into the form of a mythical woman who has just given birth (e.g. a votive word for barren women: T. V: 7). In terms of plant motives, a deity in the form of a woman who has just given birth is most frequently identified with a tree (especially a fecund one). The result of the process is a "woman-tree" or more general a "woman-plant", the entity still most persistent in the symbolical pictures (T. IV: B). The product of the relation between a woman and a house is a "womanhouse" image representing the factors that are the source of happiness and well-being of a family (T. IV: C; examples: T. V: 1, 2). In close relation to the latter form there is a variant of a woman who has already given birth, in which she is described as giving birth inside a house. In this case the goal of the symbolisation is probably transferred to the essence - the space that the house encloses (examples: T. V: 3, 4). - We can follow the Slavic examples of such mythical pictures even back to the neolithic period<sup>14</sup>.

As mentioned above, those mythical images also form a relation with symmetrical pictures - the symbols of cosmic dynamics. There are some specific variants of the basic meanings: a picture of a woman who is just giving birth with a pair of animals at her side (the reflection of the image of giving birth, i.e. the creation as a result of the reconciliation of dualistic forces) - the animals are presented as being part of the woman -; there is also another symbolical form of a woman who has just given birth with her legs spread and ending in the form of an animal head (T. IV: E, F; examples: T. III: 3, 4, 5), and a woman who has just given birth forming a circle which symbolises giving birth as being part of a cycle, or the creation of a cycle itself (T. IV: D; T. V: 8).

<sup>12</sup> It should be pointed out that the primordial woman was giving birth most often in a sitting position.

<sup>13</sup> On this and other tables from Tesalia see: Н. Чаусидис, Пагано-словенски култни предмети од Тесалија, I, II, Годишен зборник на филозофскиот факултет, 19(45), 20(46), Скопје, 1992, 1993, 141-166, 159-178.

<sup>14</sup> See: Н. Чаусидис, Митските..., Т.: XXXI, XXXIV, XXXVII, XLVII, XLIX.

In any of the above-mentioned forms of mythical pictures, a specific meaning is assigned to the object to which the woman is giving birth. Each of these objects reflects a specific sphere of the universe, the creation and perpetuation of which is of close interest to Man.

Giving birth to floral elements (most frequently represented by a generalised picture of a plant) can reflect a wish that the fields may be rich in crops; on the other hand it can also reflect the beginning of a new growing cycle or any of the four seasons, and holidays: for example spring or the beginning of a new year (examples: T. V: 5, 6). Giving birth to animals - except in the literal sense (increasing the herd) - can also be a sign of general prosperity<sup>15</sup>.

The active cosmic elements which the mythical woman is giving birth to (various symbols of the sun and fire represented as geometric, floral or anthropomorphic solar disks and rosettas) should be understood as symbols of the diurnal or annual solar cycles (T. V: 11, 12). A mythical picture of giving birth to fire has not yet been identified; however, there are facts pointing to its existence, even though if just in the form of a mental picture. This is confirmed by the South Slavic rituals of making the so-called "living fire" in the ancient way, by rubbing two sticks together - one made of hard and the other one of soft wood. Many elements of these rituals bear a distinct sexual character (two wooden sticks have the names related to the male and female sex; there are also evident sexual allusions as to the participants in those rituals: there is always a pair of them, mostly of the opposite sex, who are naked when performing the ritual and have to refrain from sexual activities beforehand...). The cosmological aspect of this mythical image of creating or literally giving birth to fire (the act being the consequence of coitus between heaven and earth) reflects the form, i.e. the character of more modern tools for making fire: flintstone as the "heavenly stone" under the patronage of male deities, and tinder as an element originating in earth. The latter (in the Slavic culture, as well as the cultures of other peoples) has been shaped in two variant forms: as a rhombus and as a narrow ellipse with corner poles (= vulva) or two sharp sides, which in our opinion is related to the stylised image of the mythical woman who has given birth (see: T. V: 14)<sup>16</sup>.

The mythical woman who has already given birth is also represented as giving birth to yet another, usually smaller woman. We believe the latter symbolises her successor, who is to replace her mother when she no longer has the procreative power. By multiplication of this pair an ornament is formed (most frequently a vertical one) consisting of two successive acts of giving birth: this symbolises the permanent quality and the continuity of the creative processes within the universe. The ornament can be found in the embroideries, wooden furniture decorations, in architecture, metal products, etc. (examples: T. V: 9, 10, 13)<sup>17</sup>.

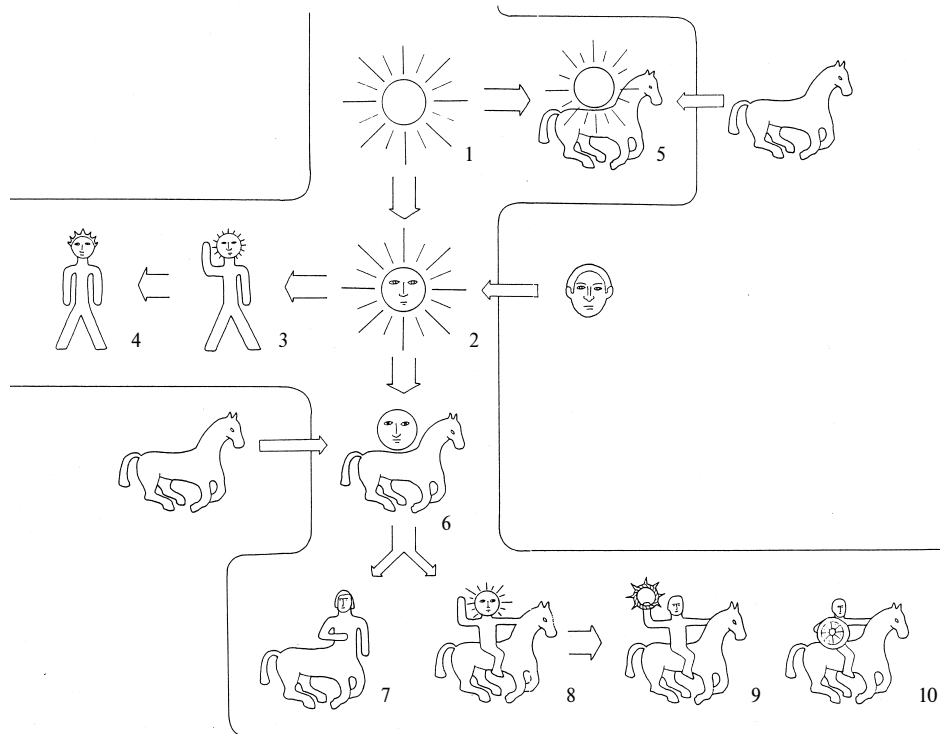
<sup>15</sup> In Slavic languages too, words for domestic animals had connotation of material goods, arrival, richness and plenty.

<sup>16</sup> Understandably the shape of tinder was adapted to its function, i.e. the need to hold it firmly in one's hand.

<sup>17</sup> For majority of the described types of mythical pictures parallels have been found in the Slavic mythical folklore, rituals, and religious beliefs, recorded in the 19th and 20th centuries and by means of historic sources also in the Middle Ages (Н. Чаусидис, Митските..., chapter: "Слики на жескиот принцип").

### III. THE SOLAR MYTHICAL PICTURES

The Sun is the centre of the world of archaic cultures and no other cosmic element (with a possible exception of water) holds such an important role in the existence of the earlier men. This is the very reason for their frequent presence in all forms of manifestation of the mythical. This is the case also in their projections pertaining to the plastic arts in the traditional culture of the Slavs.



T. VI: personalisation and the dynamics of the sun as presented in mythical pictures.

The Sun is a complex element accompanied by a series of accompanying manifestations, emanations and levels of existence and different activities. The archaic men connected each of them (on the basis of real and metaphysical relations) with one of their existential needs or spheres of interest. These functions of the sun are manifested by specific mythical images, through the media of speech and vision.

The shape of the sun evokes several mythical images which are universal, i.e. they are not only part of the Slavic culture. They can be divided into geometrical images (crosslike forms, and circular forms), floral images (rosetta-shape forms), zoomorphic images (heads of lions, horses, deer: the head is identified with the disk and the golden horns or the man with sunrays). We would especially like to emphasise the anthropomorphic image of the sun represented in the form of a human head (with golden hair and beard...) which is intended - apart from its form - to suggest the personality of the sun, indicating to it as

being a personal entity, i.e. a personality. This mythical picture is then transformed into a complete anthropomorphic figure, i.e. a mythical figure or deity, representing the sun. Its basic feature is once again the head - golden and bright, with light or golden hair (T. VI: 1, 2, 3, 4; examples: T. VII: 1, 2, 3, 6). One of the basic characteristics of the sun is its



T. VII: 1. graffito, Pliska 2. lucky charm, Preslav 3. gravestone, Montenegro 4. graffito, Pliska 5. lucky charm, Varna 6. metal tablet, Tesalia 7. gravestone, Herzegovina 8. graffito, Preslav 9. graffito, Macedonia 10. embroidery, Russia 11. fibula, Bled 12. metal tablet, Tesalia.

dynamics, which is the reason why it has to find its place in mythical pictures. In the visual medium this has been done in various ways.

In any of the above-mentioned symbolical images the forms of the sun were represented as being multiplied, with the aim of presenting particular phases within a cycle. As mentioned before, the solar disk or its multiplied images are put into the hands of anthropomorphic mythical figures in order - amongst other reasons - to evoke their dynamics (T. I: 7-10). Most frequently the dynamics of the sun was presented by the method of identifying it with one of the animals which are characterised by motion (T. VI: 1, 2, 5, 6). Usually this is a horse, a deer or any of the birds. The identification can be complete (the body of the animal represents the sun) or partial (through fantasy images of half-sun, half-animal, i.e. the "sun-bird" or the "sun with wings"...). The identification is made by the sun (represented in any of the known forms) set upon the body or the shoulders of the animals or tied to them. One of the striking variants is that in which the solar disk is represented in the form of a human head set upon the shoulders of a galloping horse (T. VI: 6; examples: T. VII: 4, 5). The union of anthropomorphic symbols of the shape of the sun, and zoomorphic symbols of dynamics produces a mythical picture of a solar figure riding a four-legged animal (or a bird, although this image is not very common in the Balkans) or flying on it. This picture represents the beginning of the archetypical mythical picture of a Slavic solar horseman (T. VI: 7-10).

In the Balkans there is one variant which is emphasized: this is an early and not entirely anthropomorphized (i.e. non-naturalised) variant of this mythical picture in which the head of the horseman has no elements of a human face but has the form of a solar disk with a cross or rosetta or a radial aureole (examples: T. VII: 7-10). There are also some completely anthropomorphized examples, although these are less common (T. VII: 11, 12).

In the regions settled by the Slavs the images of the sun rendered more dynamic by means of any transportation device - the products of early human culture (a carriage, boat or sleigh) - are not among the most impressive ones. Likewise, the symbolical images of the sunrays - identified by means of a spear or lightning - are also not emphasised, except in cases when they are attributes of figures with a solar character.

Let us mention once more the symmetrical zoo-anthropomorphic compositions among which there are also those with an especially emphasised solar aspect. The latter is represented through a central (usually female) figure and lateral horse-riding figures, encircled by solar symbols (rosettas, disks, swastikas).<sup>18</sup>

#### IV. PICTURES CONVEYING THE MALE PRINCIPLE

As is the case with the female figures, the basis on which the entire symbolical structure of the male mythical figures, i.e. deities, is formed remains once again the basic biological function of Man (in this case understandably the male), and all the other activities through which this biological function is expressed. While the figure of a woman in the oldest female deities is intended to represent, above all, the creation of all life, its sustenance, and the creation of all material, the figure of a male is mainly to represent the non-material manifestation of the energies within the universe. While the female figures

<sup>18</sup> At the end of the chapter "Соларни митси слики" we have tried to connect the results of our research with the names of the Slavic solar deities from the Middle Ages historic sources (Dažbog, Svarožič, Hors...) and with relevant folk traditions, i.e. rituals, mythical tradition and epic poems (Н. Чаусидис, Митските..., 309-331).



relate mainly to material categories, the male figures relate mainly to non-material and non-fathomable reasons for the existence of the former. Aside from biological functions there are also cultural functions, which are part of the symbolical system. The latter are mostly represented as being superstructural to the former (see: T. VIII).

The male genitals are one of the first and most simple symbols of man's procreative power. In the Slavic culture they are represented in the form of cult objects in their life size. They were used for ritual and magic purposes (example: T. IX: 4). However, the cult objects represented in the form of an anthropomorphic phallus (the penis has the elements of an anthropomorphic face) are even more common within the Slavic culture (T. VIII: 1, 2, 5; examples: T. IX: 1, 2). While the phallus is present on the cult object to reflect the tendencies of the mythical consciousness, to fix the category of "procreativity" to the object (the body organ) which is characterised by it, the anthropomorphicized phallus reflects the tendencies to present the subject which carries out this function.

The anthropomorphicized phallus can be found on the cult objects used as requisites with a ritual-magic character; it may also serve as an iconographic basis of small house idols as well as monumental idols placed in shrines (example: T. IX: 3).

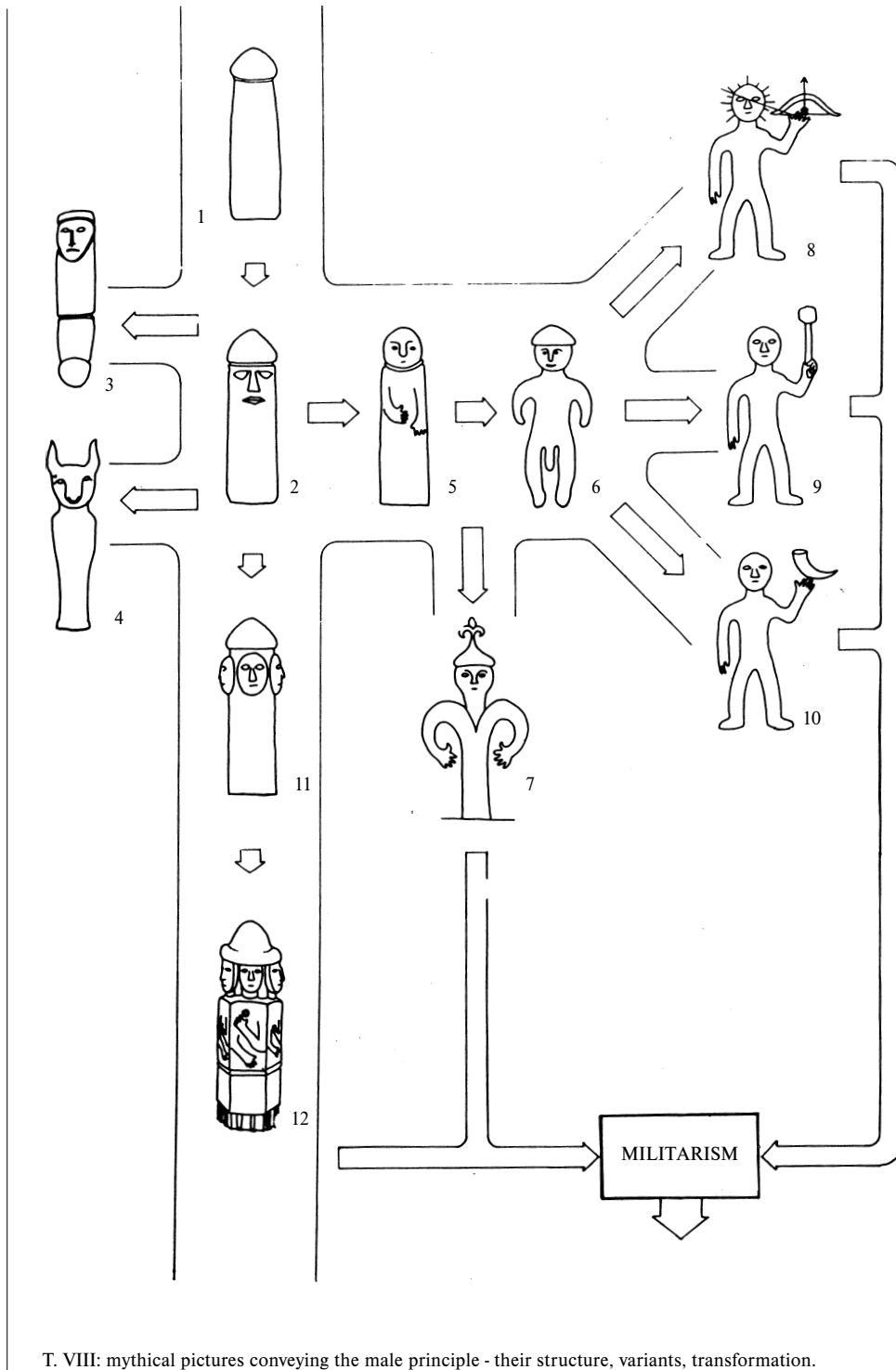
The last type of mythical picture is a half-phase of the process of complete anthropomorphisation of the male principle, i.e. the image of the anthropomorphic figure (a male deity of any other category of mythical figures) - the medium of procreative power (T. VIII: 2, 5, 6). The basic symbolical element reflecting his procreational function remains a phallus which is in most cases represented as oversized or in erection.

The most interesting example reflecting this mythical image are the cult figurines of the mythical figure German. In Bulgaria, Serbia and Romania (where he is known as Kalojan) these figurines are made by women using clay or other organic materials (wood, straw, textiles). In honour of this mythical figure (most commonly he is naked and the emphasis is on his phallus) a burial is arranged. It consists of the procession, mourning and actual burial (the figurine may also be thrown into water); all this is done with the purpose of controlling the natural waters (T. IX: 5, 6).

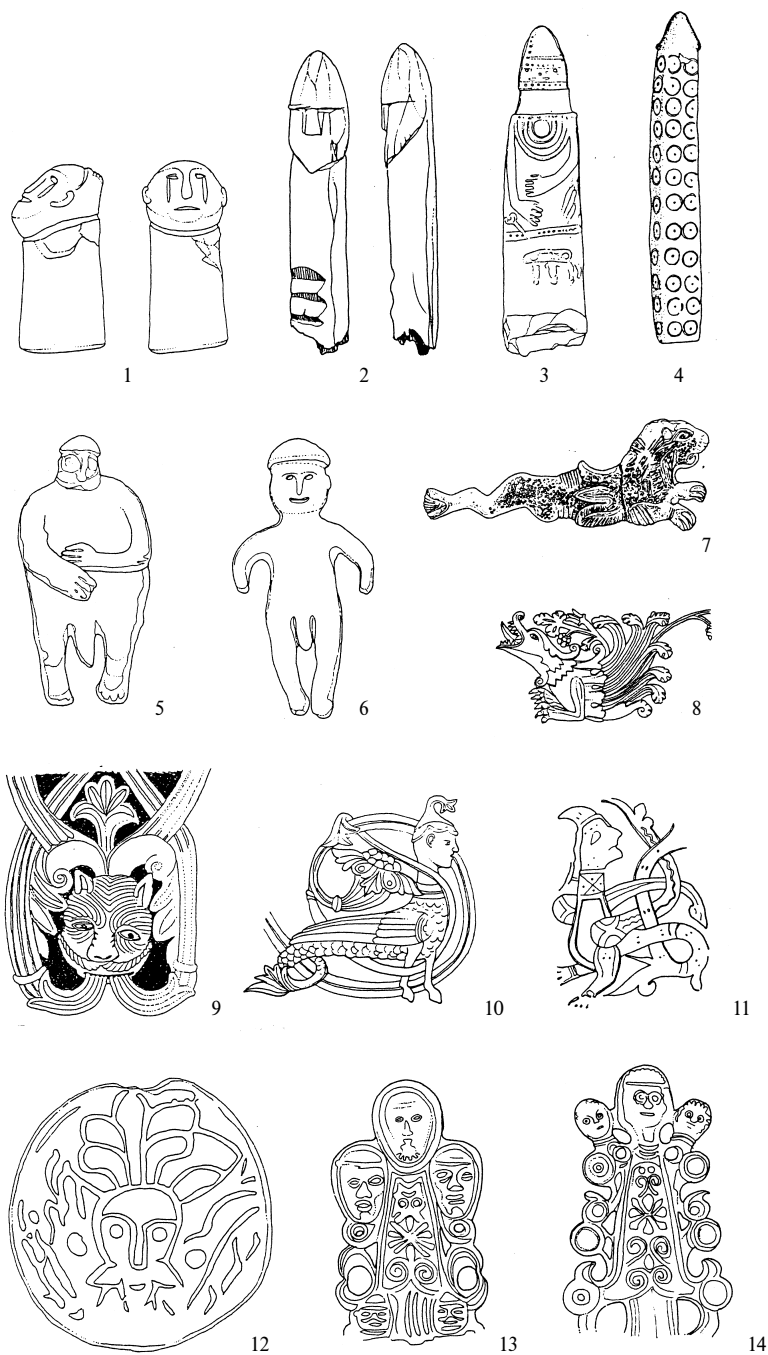
In mythical images the male principle represents various spheres of nature or culture, which leads to more or less specialised deities or pantheons (T. VIII: 7, 8, 9, 10). The male mythical figure with floral motives growing out of his body is a reflection of the mythical notion of the male factor within the vegetation cycles in nature. This image may be understood in yet another way. The death of a male figure may be - within the concept of a "sacrificed deity" - a condition for the beginning of a new vegetation cycle. Such mythical pictures are found on the tombstones, jewellery, and ornaments in the Christian shrines (from the Middle Ages), and in manuscripts (examples: T. IX: 10, 11). These objects may reflect various domains of influence of the above-mentioned former deity: patronage in terms of the agricultural sphere, reinforcement of the procreative power of the human body, participating in the destiny of the deceased in his life after death. This type of mythical picture has its zoomorphic variant with plants growing out of animals (of various kinds) (examples: T. IX: 7, 8). It is thought that in this may have been a way of representing the Slavic mythical figure Simargl - a dog with earthly and heavenly attributes (with the tail of a snake or fish, and wings), and later his anthropomorphicized variant, most probably Pereplut.

This symbolical concept is to be found intertwined in the basis of one of the images of the Slavic underworld deity (maybe Veles, Crnobog...?) who is represented only by a

Mythical Pictures of the South Slavs



T. VIII: mythical pictures conveying the male principle - their structure, variants, transformation.



T. IX: 1. ceramic phallus, Bitola 2. wooden phallus, Staraya Rusa 3. stone idol, Tesalia 4. stone phallus, Bulgaria 5. clay figurine, Bulgaria 6. clay figurine, Bulgaria 7. metal tablet, Tesalia 8. wood carving, Ohrid 9. stone relief, Serbia 10. stone relief, Serbia 11. bracelet, Ryazan 12. lucky charm, Preslav 13. fibula, the Balkans (Constantinople?) 14. fibula, the Balkans (Constantinople?).

head (mostly wearing moustaches and having zoomorphic qualities) out of which various plants are growing (examples: T. IX: 9, 12). The traces of the other mythical picture - in which the underworld deity (in this case called Triglav, Trojan...) is presented as having three heads - can be found in the case of the idol of Zbruč as well as the Slavic fibulae from the Balkan region (T. IX: 13, 14).

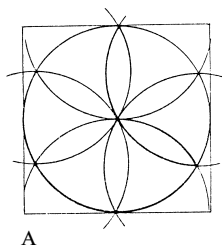
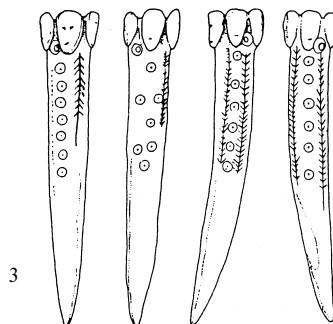
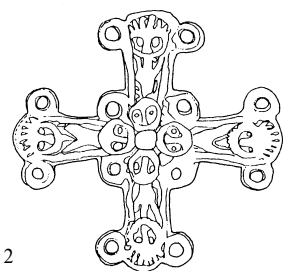
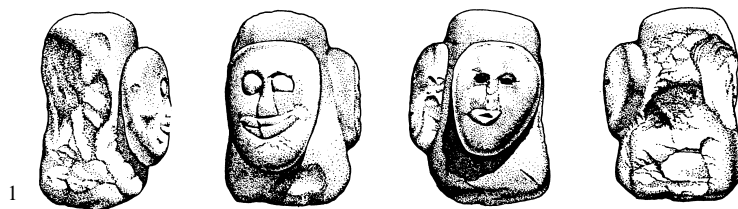
The mythical consciousness projects the male principle not only onto the underworld-vegetation sphere, but also onto the dynamic and energy processes mostly connected with the sky, which in addition to the sun also include thunder and lightning, and daylight. Each of these is presented by specific symbols, mythical pictures, mythical figures, and deities.

Thunder and lightning are presented by two categories of symbols: the symbols in the first category emphasise its beating and resonant actions (the corresponding symbols are axes, heavy sticks, hammers) and its fire-light nature (the corresponding symbols are lightning, spears, and fire presented in the form of flintstones). The connection between thunder and the various symbols that contain the number six is particularly interesting (T. X: 4): there is a six-leaf rosetta in a circle (A), a wheel with six crossbars (B), bees and their hexagonal honeycomb, and finally the blossom of *Iris Germanica* in the geometrical shape of which there are two pairs of three-blossom leaves set against each other. In the horizontal projection there are two equilateral triangulars merged into a hexagram (C, D); in vertical projection there are two triple forms (E, F). An analogy can be drawn with the ancient Roman and Greek graphic symbols of thunder (the two-sided "trident" of Zeus, i.e. Jupiter, and the analogous Hindu symbols of thunder - "vajra").

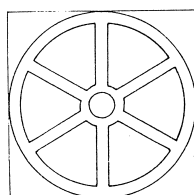
The figure of the thunderman was shown with one of the abovementioned symbols in his hand. According to historical sources, in the Eastern Slavic culture, the thunderman Perun held a stick, a spear, lightning or a flintstone in his raised hand. We have found evidence of several objects of a cult character in the Balkans on which there are pictures of male figures with an axe or similar tool (a hammer, a spiked club) in his raised hand (examples: T. X: 5, 6).

Through everyday experience, transformed and perfected over several generations, the archaic consciousness came to understand the primary character of light and its importance for the existence of Man and the universe in general. Thus in context of light the supreme Slavic deity was formed, a patron of the sky and daily light, a creator of the world and Man, and the master of other deities. In mythical pictures the light, as an exceptionally abstract notion (which cannot be captured by means of the plastic arts), is symbolically represented by the eyes or - more generally - by the human face (which is assigned the meaning of "looking" - the role of the organ of perception and the consciousness). This can be concluded on the basis of the images of the supreme Slavic deities of whom we have learned from historical sources (Svantevit in Arkona...), as well as from the archaeological finds. In all of these cases there is one symbolical concept present which is not specific to the Slavic culture: the central tower (represented in the form of a pillar, stick, or phallus) with several (most often four) human heads, i.e. faces on top of it; with the heads looking in different directions. We believe that this mythical picture reflects the supreme deity with the light shining towards all the cardinal points (T. VIII: 2, 11; examples: T. X: 1, 3). We are also familiar with the two dimensional variants, with the cross as the basis and with figures on each of its sides (example: T. X: 2).

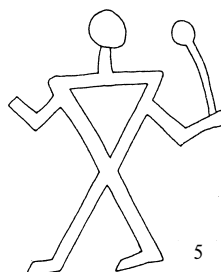
A Slovene folk story confirms the existence of this mythical image in the oral tradition and thus reveals its cosmogonic character. As the story goes, in the beginning there



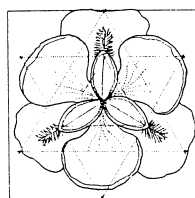
A



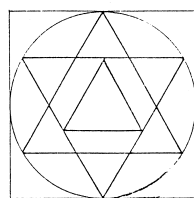
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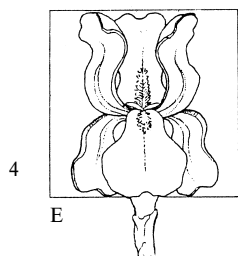
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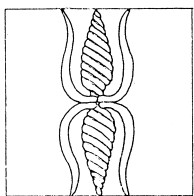
C



D



E



F



6

T. X: 1. stone idol, Dalmatia 2. metal cross, Dalmatia 3. article made of animal horn, Preslav 4. symbols of thunder and lightning 5. a decorative motive on a ring, Serbia 6. metal tablet, Tesalia.

was nothing but God who had been sleeping and dreaming from time immemorial. When he woke up he began to create the world through his vision. After the first look he created the earth, after the second the sun, then the moon and afterward the stars...<sup>19</sup>

In the more evolved phase of this mythical image each of the faces of the supreme deity is transformed into complete figures which represent individual deities - the members of the pantheon (T. VII: 12). Because of these individual deities the anthropomorphic image of the supreme deity begins to be lost. The latter is now represented by the principal tower of an idol (the best example is the idol from Zbruč). This mythical picture gives immediate relevance to several questions which, hitherto, Slavic pagan religion has been considered incapable of answering, and these issues are: henotheism, monotheism (at least in the potential sense), and non-corporal representation of the Supreme Deity.

### **Mitske podobe Južnih Slovanov**

*Nikos Čausidis*

*Prispevek je izšel tudi v slovenščini: Nikos Čausidis, Mitske slike južnih Slovanov. - Historični seminar II (uredila Oto Luthar & Vojislav Likar), Ljubljana 1997, 25 - 48.*

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<sup>19</sup> Then he set on a journey to see what he had created through his vision. After travelling a while he got tired, and a sweatdrop from his forehead fell onto the ground: from this sweatdrop Man was created (J. Kelemina, *Bajke in pripovedke slovenskega ljudstva*, Celje 1930, 291).